

# Media Presentation and Gender Construction: Dual Identity Dilemma and Breakthrough of Female Athletes

Cao Ziyu<sup>1,a</sup>, Yao Xingliang<sup>1,b,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Changzhou University, Changzhou, China

<sup>a</sup>354182568@qq.com, <sup>b</sup>yaoxingliang@cczu.edu.cn

\*Corresponding author

**Abstract:** This study examines how media coverage shapes the construction of dual identities in female athletes and its subsequent influence on the development of women's sports. By analyzing the current state of media coverage, it was found that female athletes face gender stereotypes in the sports field. Their athletic abilities are often overshadowed by their appearance and perceived gender temperament. The research suggests that the media plays a crucial role in gender construction. The way media reports not only affects the public's perception of female athletes but also exacerbates gender inequality in the sports field and restricts the healthy development of women's sports.

**Keywords:** Gender Construction, Media Presentation, Dual Identity, Femininity, Gender Equality

## 1. Introduction

The first ancient Olympic Games began in 776 BC, restricting participation exclusively to male citizens of Greek city-states. Women faced exclusion both as competitors and spectators. This policy reflected the Greek worldview that devalued female physicality, which was seen as deficient in both mental discipline and athletic capability. Female societal roles remained confined mainly to the domestic sphere throughout antiquity. These athletic traditions created a model centred on male authority, functioning as platforms to demonstrate virility, bravery, and social status.

Modern competitive sports maintain this male-centred legacy through rigorous physical standards and hyper-competitive environments that continue to marginalise female involvement. Media representations further sustain this imbalance through gendered portrayals that vary by sport and athlete gender, quietly upholding male athletic supremacy. These institutional frameworks function as mechanisms of control against non-dominant groups like women and LGBTQ+ communities while consolidating power for privileged male demographics<sup>[1]</sup>. The 2012 London Olympics represented a significant milestone in achieving gender parity in sports. In 2022, the Beijing Winter Olympics recorded the highest female participation rate in history, with the number of female athletes increasing dramatically from just 11 in 1924 to 1,314. Looking ahead, the 2024 Paris Olympics will celebrate a historic achievement, as they will feature an equal number of competitors—5,250 male and 5,250 female—marking the first time in Olympic history that a complete gender balance has been achieved<sup>[2]</sup>. In 2021, China launched the National Fitness Plan (2021-2025), explicitly emphasising “promoting fitness programs for key demographic groups”. This policy framework focuses on ensuring women's equal access to sports participation<sup>[3]</sup>. In the United States, the 1972 enactment of Title IX—legislation prohibiting gender discrimination in federally funded educational programs—led to a remarkable increase in female athletic participation, which grew from 300,000 in 1972 to 3 million by 2011<sup>[4]</sup>.

Over time, women's participation in sports and their success have increased, and as a result, they have received more and more attention from the media and society at large. However, despite women's growing involvement in sports and their notable achievements, media coverage of female athletes has shown only marginal improvement. Studies have shown that traditional media often show gender bias when reporting, usually tend to pay too much attention to entertainment content, but also pay too much attention to the appearance of female athletes, saying that women in sports are faced with some challenges on the one hand, they need to show their athletic ability. On the other hand, they also have to contend with the media's excessive attention to their gender image. This creates a dual identity that highlights their athletic skills, while the other attempts to conform to society's expectations of femininity.

## 2. Media, Gender, and Sports

### 2.1 Current State and Issues in Sports Media Coverage of Female Athletes

Women's sports participation has grown significantly, yet media representation still lags. Wu Xuejun and Zhang Linqian's<sup>[5]</sup> analysis revealed that merely 7.9% of 365 sports reports in Southern Metropolis Daily's September 2015 coverage focused on women's athletics. The sports media landscape persistently frames competitive sports as masculine domains, routinely sidelining female competitors. Agenda-setting theory<sup>[6]</sup> how media outlets influence public priorities through selective reporting. Recent years have seen gradual improvements in the volume and quality of press attention toward female athletes. For example, in China's major sporting events, coverage is increasingly highlighting women's competitive achievements and training processes, rather than fixating on physical appearance, personal relationships, or sensational stories. However, persistent gender biases persist in sports journalism. Compared to male athletes, female competitors still face substantial disparities in media resource allocation and the depth of reporting required to achieve genuine equality in sports coverage<sup>[7]</sup>.

Media coverage of gender inequality reveals two core problems: how sports reporting strengthens stereotypes through female athlete depictions and why sports media maintain societal gender gaps. Research shows commentators consistently highlight women's looks and personalities to contrast them with male athletes described as "strong" and "controlling"<sup>[4]</sup>. Media workers defend this practice by claiming, "We use visual emphasis to engage viewers since memorable images boost audience retention." They argue that this strategy helps female athletes balance sporting intensity with traditional feminine expectations<sup>[8]</sup>. However, sports-related sexism remains culturally entrenched. Gender bias operates as sports' "silent protocol"—so normalised that most viewers overlook it, and those who notice dismiss it as "sports tradition" rather than discrimination.

### 2.2 Identity Dilemma of Female Athletes

This paper finds that female athletes face significant challenges managing many social roles. On the one hand, they have to deal with various situations brought about by traditional sports culture, on the other hand, they must conform to conventional feminine ideals in appearance and behavior, as well as to social expectations of "appropriate" female behavior. Their athletic careers require confidence, competitiveness, and physical fitness, traditionally seen as masculine, making them constantly negotiate conflicting identities in a male-dominated sports environment. Essentially, this has an impact on their self-perception and their public image.

Female athletes must seek balance in their dual identities. On the one hand, they need to highlight their competitiveness through media protests and break the inherent notion of 'women being weak'. On the other hand, they must cater to traditional aesthetics and make the public accept "non-threatening feminine traits". Although the number of women participating in sports has increased, today's female athletes still face challenges such as questionable achievements, stereotypes rooted in historical and cultural ideologies, and pressure to manage the dual identities of women and athletes. As many scholars<sup>[9]</sup> have pointed out, female athletes face a paradox, where the conflict between femininity and male athletic ability requires them to resolve or cope with this contradiction. Female athletes must constantly fight against the stigma of women in sports, that is, all women who participate in sports, especially those who participate in sports such as hockey and rugby, which are considered male sports, are considered homosexual. Female athletes are afraid of being labeled, and this fear stems from the contradiction between their athletic image and traditional standards of female traits. When their appearance does not meet the requirements of historical and current gender norms, they are seen as "outliers", blurring the line between men and women in the public eye. To address this issue, many female athletes devote their time and energy to competitions, often wearing makeup, earrings, necklaces, and other jewelry, or wearing tight-fitting clothing that showcases their feminine figure to enhance or exaggerate their feminine qualities.

At the 2018 French Open, Serena Williams wore a black Nike bodysuit, sparking controversy. The tournament director considered it "too exaggerated" and against traditional dress codes. As a postpartum player, Serena needed tech-enabled gear for physical support, but was constrained by society's gender-role expectations for female athletes—they must display both competitiveness and conventionally feminine traits. This tension highlights the struggle female athletes face in balancing functionality and gender norms in sports.

### ***2.3 Media, Women, and Sports from a Gender Theory Perspective***

In 1988, Butler initiated a discussion on the distinction between biological gender and social gender. She believes both are constructed by society, and biological gender is a projection of social gender expectations<sup>[10]</sup>. The theory's core concept is "performativity," which means that gender is dynamically constructed. Gender identity is constantly reconstructed through social interaction and behavior rather than being static or innate. It is defined by both individual performance and social interpretation, rather than being solely determined by biological gender. As a part of public discourse, the media influences our views on gender traits through reporting and narration. The media is not only a tool for transmitting information but also profoundly influences our understanding of gender roles.

The mass media usually reflect mainstream ideology. In sports reports, men's achievements are more emphasised, while women are often regarded as a "supporting role". When describing female athletes in the media, content such as their appearance and family background, which is usually unrelated to their athletic abilities, frequently appears. It undermines their professionalism and importance, putting them in a subordinate position. On the one hand, traditional gender concepts are deeply rooted. This leads to societal expectations of women deviating from the core values of competitive sports, thereby affecting the media's reporting methods and content choices. On the other hand, the commercial operation model of media pursues high ratings and click-through rates. This has led to a tendency for the press to report on male sports events with greater commercial value, thereby reinforcing the dominant position of men in the sports field. The commercial operation model of the media pursues high ratings and click-through rates, tends to report more male sports projects with commercial value, and strengthens the dominant position of men in the sports field. In addition, gender differences and unequal event management in the sports field limit female athletes' opportunities for exposure and development. It prevents their contributions and value from being fully demonstrated. The gender perspective and information needs of the audience also affect the direction and content selection of media reports. This leads to the media focusing more on non-competitive aspects such as appearance and family background when reporting on women's sports rather than professional performance and achievements.

Therefore, we need to recognize the media's influence on gender construction, actively promote changes in reporting on female athletes, more fairly and comprehensively showcase the role and value of women in sports, gradually break the shackles of male hegemony in the sports field, and promote gender equality in the sports industry and even the entire society.

## **3. Media Portrayal of Female Athletes**

### ***3.1 Gender Bias in Media Reporting and Female Athlete Imagery***

Sports competitions are usually strictly divided into male and female categories, a strict categorisation rarely seen in other fields. In sports, there is a pronounced emphasis on gender differences, and each participant must be definitively classified as either male or female. Sports reporting reveals notable disparities in the coverage of male and female athletes. Female athletes' coverage often emphasises non-competitive factors such as appearance and family background. In contrast, the coverage of male athletes focuses on their performance and achievements. Unequal treatment based on bias or stereotypes and unfairly harming a group constitutes discrimination. Gender discrimination in media sports has long-term negative impacts on female athletes. It tends to ignore and belittle their achievements, focusing instead on their appearance, private lives, femininity, and sexual orientation, even when they achieve admirable athletic results. Western scholars' research indicates that in sports reporting, female athletes are often marginalised (with few reporting opportunities and low attention), underrated (their athletic achievements are not valued), and over-feminized (emphasising non-competitive factors like appearance)<sup>[11]</sup>. This has disappointed people due to the difficulty of changing this deeply rooted phenomenon, and they are cautiously optimistic about the progress of social concepts.

As the first athlete from Sichuan Province to qualify for the Paris Olympics, Wu Yanni has brought honour to China's sports industry through her efforts and perseverance. However, some media outlets have focused on her finger movements, clothing, hairstyle, makeup, and tattoos, among other aspects. Even champions are inevitably subjected to malicious attacks from some netizens. From the perspective of gender equality, the controversy caused by Wu Yanni in the sports field in recent years highlights the bias in the sports industry. Every athlete inevitably experiences changes in their competitive state. Wu Yanni faced public controversy during a race and had to respond publicly through social media platforms. One mistake should not overshadow her strength as a top athlete on the national track and field team.

The ups and downs of her grades precisely reflect her efforts to break through herself. Compared to male athletes, the physical characteristics, competition attire, and body shape management of female athletes often become the core topics of media coverage.

In the evaluation system for female athletes, non-competitive factors such as emotional state and privacy are excessively amplified. The competition results are often linked to personal life. However, their breakthroughs and contributions in the professional field are easily overlooked. Such reporting bias exposes the stereotypical impression of female athletes in society. People tend to judge their career values based on traditional gender frameworks rather than on competitiveness. Even more worrying is that some media deliberately downplay their professional contributions in their reports. They attribute their success to accidental factors or exceptional opportunities rather than affirming their long-term efforts and strength. This distorted narrative not only compresses the development space of female athletes but also invisibly exacerbates gender inequality in the sports world.

Nowadays, society advocates gender equality. The media should play an entirely positive guiding role. They should present a balanced and accurate image of athletes from diverse perspectives and convey positive and proactive sportsmanship through inclusive and open narratives. This is the responsibility of the media.

### ***3.2 Stereotypes and Image of Female Athletes***

The public's perception of female athletes often places their gender above their athletic skills, primarily viewing them as women in the sports industry rather than evaluating their athletic abilities or performance in competitions. The gender bias in sports media reports is directly related to the real identity and career trajectory of athletes. Viewers often subconsciously evaluate female competitors through media-filtered lenses, hoping to showcase traditional "feminine" traits such as elegance and composure.

In sports such as gymnastics and figure skating, female athletes attract considerable attention, which is related to their flexibility, coordination, and displayed skills, consistent with the artistic and complex nature of the sports. This attention also reflects society's expectations for women's "elegant" image. However, although the media praises the elegance and artistic expression of female athletes, it often overlooks an in-depth analysis of their athletic skills. It focuses more on whether they meet the standards of "beauty", perpetuating the inherent societal norms regarding women's appearance.

While pursuing competitive performance, female athletes also face societal expectations regarding their appearance and market value, which may conflict with their sense of identity and athletic goals. Kane et al. <sup>[4]</sup> found that female athletes have complex and conflicting emotions regarding their dual identities. On the other hand, they take pride in their athletic physique and muscle lines. Because they symbolise their efforts and achievements, they are concerned that this body image may be misunderstood or questioned in social settings outside of the sports arena.

Bruce<sup>[11]</sup> proposed the concept of "beauty and strength", challenging traditional beliefs, encouraging a rethinking of the objectification of female athletes, and promoting a more positive, diverse, and gender-equal view of the image and roles of women in sports. The positive media image of celebrity athletes can inspire people's enthusiasm for sports, promote market development and value enhancement in the sports industry, and foster the dissemination and inheritance of sports culture, which is conducive to the development of the national sports industry. When the camera focuses on the game, we may see the most authentic sports appearance. Without gender distinctions, we can only continue to challenge the limits of humanity.

## **4. Athletic and Social Identity**

### ***4.1 The Gender Framework of Female Athletes Constructed by the Media***

Athletic identity describes how strongly someone embraces being an athlete<sup>[12]</sup>. Those deeply connected to this role often tie their self-esteem to sports achievements. Meanwhile, social identity forms through people categorising themselves within groups and building community connections. Social identity theory explains that aligning with groups motivates members to take collective actions that strengthen these bonds. Media portrayals of women's sports also mould societal views about female competitors, using visual and textual cues to reinforce traditional gender expectations.

Bruce<sup>[11]</sup> demonstrates how media constructs female athletes' gender perceptions through two key

mechanisms. First, athletes must maintain conventional feminine ideals while displaying competitive drive. Second, the media reinforces standards by emphasising heterosexual attributes while marginalising non-conforming groups like lesbian or more masculine athletes. Women in physically demanding sports face perceptions of “compromised femininity,” with their heterosexual credentials frequently questioned. Female competitors are portrayed either as adopting “tomboy” personas with softened masculine qualities or strategically emphasizing sexualised appearances to preserve heterosexual credibility<sup>[13]</sup>.

#### ***4.2 Challenges and Breakthroughs in the Dual Identity of Female Athletes***

Women’s growing participation in sports demonstrates that female athletes have transcended traditional limitations and are now actively engaged in the field. However, Mean and Kassing (2008) contend that societal acceptance of “muscular femininity” may, to some extent, tacitly endorse the notion that women must conform to a specific “athletic image” to gain recognition in the sports domain. This perception could potentially restrict female athletes’ opportunities to express diverse feminine qualities, thus diminishing the diversity of women’s sports. Only when women show traits distinct from traditional femininity are they recognised as athletes? This perspective overlooks that female athletes can possess both strength and femininity. They should not be forced to choose between being a “woman” and an “athlete,” but should be granted more space to showcase their identities. In short, female athletes should not have to demonstrate traits that diverge from those typically associated with “conventional” women to be considered real athletes.

Historically, it has been believed that girls participate in sports primarily for social purposes, physical fitness, or other non-competitive goals rather than for competitive aspirations rooted in personal ambition. However, being an athlete should be unique and distinctive, not merely for amusement. Some women participate in sports to improve themselves and challenge restrictive traditional expectations. They break down gender barriers through sports, fostering personal growth and empowerment. MacArthur et al.<sup>[14]</sup> note that when individuals join an activity or group, their social identity goes through three stages. First, they classify themselves within the group. Next, they learn the group’s conduct norms. Finally, they absorb these norms and apply them to direct their behaviour. How women handle a group’s expectations, standards, and conventions depends on how they understand and respond to the demands of femininity, as well as how they focus on the similarities and differences between their personal and social identities and those of others in the group.

Modern sports, often considered “masculine” sports, play a significant role in men’s social interactions. This kind of sports culture is closely linked to traditional notions of masculinity. This association contributes to the persistence of gender inequality in society. The impact of gender differences reported by the media is reflected in women’s physical performance, and it promotes the emergence of gender conflicts. Ambition and passion are not innate traits of men. However, it is labelled due to its association with traditional masculinity. Female athletes must adhere to male-dominated sports norms and maintain feminine characteristics. Their identity struggle serves as a clear reminder of the deeply ingrained gender power dynamics in sports.

### **5. Sports Media Promote Diversity and Inclusion**

Sports media profoundly impact the shaping of social beliefs and values, and more and more media organizations are recognizing this. They consistently showcase players from diverse backgrounds, including those of different races, genders, and skill levels. These efforts not only help break down traditional stereotypes but also establish more positive and diverse patterns within society.

In the realm of gender equality, sports media are gradually challenging traditional stereotypes and recognizing the outstanding achievements and dedication of female athletes. During the 2024 Paris Olympics, the theme “Zheng Qingwen Gold” topped the popular search list with 840 million clicks. Similarly, swimmer Zhang Yufei challenged the universal standards of “white, thin, and young” with her strong body, spirit, and confident smile, profoundly reflecting women’s physical form and societal values. When Gong Li throws a shot put and Liu Jing performs challenging breakdancing, they showcase the beauty of sports and promote the concept of the “beauty of power” through media reports. The description of female athletes’ confidence and achievements during the Olympic Games quickly transformed social standards into a more natural and less anxious aesthetic, becoming a new consensus. By using muscular physiques, strong arms, and sharp intelligence as “new symbols of beauty,” these athletes embody self-care, dignity, and cultural depth. This transformation is re-creating social discourse from the perspective of structure and institutions. With society redefining female beauty in areas such as “muscles,” “medals,”

“hard work,” and “athletic intelligence,” women’s bodies are seen not as objects of evaluation but as symbols of self-worth and independence. These changes reflect significant progress in sports, marking a broader respect and recognition by society for the unique value and contributions of women in various fields.

Although some sports media are making efforts, many challenges to achieving true diversity and equality still exist. Traditional views and gender stereotypes influence the reporting methods of female athletes. Compared to male athletes, the reporting scope and quality of female athletes, as well as the content quality, are significantly worse. These difficulties may lead us to fear, but they make us realise the necessity of progressing on this point. Media organisations should continue to make progress and eliminate obstacles hindering the development of athletes from diverse backgrounds. Only in this way can we create a more fair and inclusive field where their achievements and stories can be seen, regardless of gender or background.

## 6. Conclusion

Gender norms are often based on physical appearance: what is perceived as masculine and what is perceived as feminine. Appearance is the key to leaving a first impression on people. Therefore, our appearance should reflect the image we want to convey to others. Traditionally, women’s appearance is usually gentle and beautiful. They are always quiet and obedient. The appearance of female athletes is different from traditional feminine qualities. It may be muscular or aggressive. Therefore, they do not follow tradition and are labelled as masculine. Stereotypes affect the gender distribution of sports events and exacerbate gender differences. Women must constantly challenge the erroneous notion that women possess power and ability.

Sports are an essential part of society, reflecting respected values such as respect, effort, and honesty. However, these qualities are often limited by gender labels, which affect our social expectations of others. Today, we witness how marginalised groups bravely challenge and break down categorisation and stigma, especially women. They constantly face many obstacles that hinder equality and progress, including media questioning of women’s image shaping and objectification issues, as well as the self-definition of women’s movement identity, establishing their image, and resolutely opposing gender discrimination in the workplace. They constantly struggle against the ubiquitous inequality in their lives. We must continue to work hard and conduct further research to drive real change and achieve profound resonance.

## References

- [1] Jakubowska, H. (2018). *Sport as a means of social inclusion and exclusion. Introduction to the special issue of Society Register. Society register*, 2(1), 9-17.
- [2] <https://www.olympic.cn/>
- [3] [https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2021-08/03/content\\_5629218.htm](https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2021-08/03/content_5629218.htm)
- [4] Kane, M. J., LaVoi, N. M., & Fink, J. S. (2013). *Exploring elite female athletes’ interpretations of sport media images: A window into the construction of social identity and “selling sex” in women’s sports. Communication & Sport*, 1(3), 269-298.
- [5] Wu Xuejun, & Zhang Linxi. (2017). “You Should Pay More Attention to Her Beyond Her Chest”—A Study on the Image of Women in Sports News Reports. *Media Observation*, (2), 44–46.
- [6] McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). *The agenda-setting function of mass media. Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176–187.
- [7] Wang Mingfeng, Li Fang, & Jin Qiulong. (2023). *A Study on the Presentation of Female Athletes’ Images in Online Media’s Winter Olympics Reporting. Journal of Chengdu Sport University*, 49(1), 7.
- [8] Shaller, J. (2006). *Female athletes in the media: Under representation and inadequacy. The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research*, 8(1), 50-55.
- [9] Krane, V., Choi, P. Y., Baird, S. M., Aimar, C. M., & Kauer, K. J. (2004). *Living the paradox: Female athletes negotiate femininity and muscularity. Sex roles*, 50, 315-329.
- [10] Butler, J. (2025). *Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. In The performance studies reader (pp. 186-196). Routledge.*
- [11] Bruce, T. (2017). *Sportswomen in the media: An analysis of international trends in Olympic and everyday coverage. Journal of Sport and Gender Studies*, 15, 24-39.
- [12] Brewer, B. W., Van Raalte, J. L., & Linder, D. E. (1993). *Athletic identity: Hercules’ muscles or Achilles heel?. International journal of sport psychology.*
- [13] Yang Yuhua, & Wu Guangliang. (2014). *The Gender Stereotypes and “Stigmatization” of Female*

*Athletes with Masculine Traits. Journal of Women's Studies, 000(001), 60-66.*

[14] MacArthur, P. J., Angelini, J. R., Smith, L. R., & Billings, A. C. (2017). *The Canadian state of mind: Coverage of men and women athletes in the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's prime time broadcast of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games. Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 61(2), 410–429.*